

Brother Ramon SSF and Franciscan Spirituality

It is strange that in a book on Franciscan spirituality of some 200 pages, it is only on pages 36, much later on page 165 and briefly in Chapter Five that Brother Ramon says something which I wish he had said emphatically at the beginning of his work and indeed built into his method, approach and construction of his book ('Franciscan Spirituality' SPCK 1994): that Franciscan Spirituality is not systematic.

On page 165 Ramon says 'Francis never laid down any systematic way to God or indeed any kind of didactic spirituality'. This statement is exceedingly important if we are to make any significant progress in our own understanding of what we may call 'Franciscan Spirituality'. We must indeed begin at this point - that Francis is not systematic or didactic.

If Ramon had set out this leading issue of the disorganised or eclectic state of Franciscan Spirituality at the start of the book, and discussed it fully, then his approach would have been different and many in the Third Order would not still be asking the question again and again - what is 'Franciscan Spirituality'? There would be a general agreement that Francis was not systematic and we would then be asking different questions such as: 'What in Francis's way of living and teaching helps us today?' 'What must we put to one side as culturally and historically conditioned, and what inspires and helps us now?' 'How are we too, conditioned by our culture?' 'How can we find new ways of understanding life and our journey with Jesus Christ and be inspired by his great follower Francis of Assisi?' We would perhaps be building some sort of systematic framework for understanding Francis and what his relationship with God led him to do. We might begin to map out a way in the spirit of Francis, for the early 21st Century, which is relevant to us.

Ramon sets out in Chapter 7, for example, not only a Franciscan vision of death using Franciscan examples and thought but also issues and experience for consideration today arising from much new knowledge. This indeed is a model of how we might proceed in our time. The verses in the Canticle of the Sun on 'Sister Death' are the inspiration and Ramon sets out a development of what we may term very loosely as Franciscan Spirituality. Francis would not have thought like this, but we develop our vision from the core of his ideas.

In so many ways I believe that this is the task today: to look carefully at knowledge and experience; to look at Francis life and also that of his followers; to be open to new ways of understanding life and spirituality and discover where they lead us. Francis admits at the end of his life, for example, that he has been hard on 'Brother Body'. We would not want to imitate him in this at all! I do not think that any of us would want to treat our body in the way that Francis did his.

Francis own thought at the end of his life, however, is fascinating. It is very creative. We have glimpses of his mature creative thought and writing in two great pieces of work: in the 'Canticle of the Sun', and in his 'Testament of 1226'. Both of these tell us much about a man who has travelled far, both on

land around the Mediterranean and in seeking the nature of the spiritual journey, in his relatively short life. If we in the first instance study these two documents then we can, I believe, get close to the thought of Francis at its most mature and where it is useful to our own needs in our time. 'The Canticle of the Sun' has layers of meaning to discover. Think for a moment of the Sun as being a metaphor for Jesus the Christ.

Francis testament of 1226 gives us a superb insight into the mind of a man who can be loyal to the law and organisation of the Church, the Pope, the Bishops and ordinary priests, no matter how bad or inadequate, while he also focuses brilliantly on the radical and disturbing nature of the Gospel which reveals Christ in the leper and the outsider and different. By embracing the leper and teaching about the profound meaning of this experience in the opening words of the Testament of 1226 Francis in a very deep but simple way shows us how to hold both the Third Order and our Church of England, the complexity of religious life and living the Gospel with creative courage together. He is able to handle loyalty to structure and the challenging chaos of a creative life in the unexpected, which God in life presents to us. He is able to be a loyal son of the church and do something which is very threatening and disturbing to the prevailing ways of understanding and seeing things and to our own? Lepers were seen and felt to be very dangerous and disturbing. There was no way of managing their disease other than by exclusion, but Francis discovers something different. Bitterness and nausea turned into sweetness: revulsion is turned to compassionate action. Discovering this in our own personal journey can be a very important development. It can bring us to maturity in life and faith.

We all recognise that Francis from his conversion was totally centred on Christ. I do not think Francis would recognise our 'Franciscanism' but would seek first to understand how Christian we his followers are! This would be his focus. How we are living first of all in loyalty to Christ and how we are making Christ known. How we are living out the life of Christ and teaching from both our experience and loyalty to the Gospel of Jesus and his Church.

Francis experience while praying before the Crucifix and Christ at San Damiano, and his reflection back to his followers as being an experience of Christ in God speaking to him, are examples of Francis complete dedication and focus on Jesus Christ and his desire to learn becoming inspirational. He is saying there is no future for the church unless it is focused on an attitude that listens to the crucified and risen Christ. At first Francis heard the command to build a physical church, and then discerned that it was to be a church of 'living stones' - of people. His listening to God in Christ leads to very important developments and Francis changes his mind and understanding. So a part of true Franciscan spirituality is being open to developments, to listening and discovering changes in direction and discernment.

Like wise Francis introduction of the crib at Christmas calls for a deepening focus on the Incarnation of God in Christ as the baby Jesus. This was a remarkable refocusing on the truth at the heart of our faith. Today at Christmas, parish churches and schools re-enact what Francis established in

great simplicity. The little invention by the little brother Francis still has its power to prompt questions even in the minds of those who do not believe. It connects the reality of God to the reality of our en-fleshed life and experience. Even if you do not have the gift of faith the little baby in the crib is a message few can escape. God made himself known in great humility in human flesh. It makes Christianity into a challenge to be fully human which changes the emphasis in European art and thought. .

These marker events can be seen along with many other incidents in the life of Francis as a correction and reform in the way of faith for both a Christian and the Church. The church in the time of Francis, as also in our day, has played in many ways with power and control. For the Christian of Francis day, it was a struggle between bishops and citizens of the new city states whose citizens (the growing financially independent classes) were drifting off into the heresy of the Cathars. It is because Francis is a reformer focused on the nature of God's work in Christ that he has such an appeal to those of us who are not of the Roman obedience. He resonates with the experience of reformation in our history and what it has given us and the constant need for change that glorifies God in Christ and not in an institution. Our non-Roman Franciscan Christianity is different in style, manner and culture from that of our Roman Catholic brethren.

Francis in an incredible and heroic way dedicated the whole of his life to a correction of focus in the church on to Jesus Christ, from His birth to His sacrifice on the cross and as the only possible way for his followers on the individual Christian journey and for the well-being of the Universal Church.

If there is such a thing as Franciscan Spirituality it is the complete and central focus on Christ Jesus. It is not for nothing that there is a chapel completely dedicated to Francis in the great church of the Jesuits in Rome, the 'Jesu'. Saint Ignatius was doing the same thing as Francis at a later time but in a more organised and systematic way which helps some but not all of us. If you want a completely systematic spirituality focused on Christ then it is to the Jesuits that you must go. Similarly Francis did not warm to Dominic's desire that they form an order together. He was inspired by something totally unsystematic and inspirational. It focused on total loyalty to Jesus. He was mystical, imaginative and very creative - hence his influence on art and culture.

On page 165 Ramon suggests that the mystical way of purgation, illumination and union is probably the best way of describing a Franciscan spiritual journey. It is the method set out in the teaching of Saint Bonaventure, but I am dubious about its use today without a lot of un-packaging. I do not think that this way of describing the spiritual journey will do much for most of those joining or belonging to our Anglican Third Order today. The Cappadocian fathers (Gregory of Nyssa, etc) spoke of the soul's ascent to God as an ascent into the divine darkness i.e. in that which we cannot see in a human sense and that we cannot form into a finished conception of God. The soul that looks up to God never ceases to desire God, so there can be no such thing as illumination and only a continual desire for that which cannot be seen.

This comes close to where many of us are. We have desire and faith and are moved by this faith in our hearts and minds, but not by sight.

I go along with Bishop Moorman rather than Ramon (p303 The Study of Spirituality ed. C Jones G Wainwright E Yarnold SPCK 1986). Franciscan Spirituality according to Bishop Moorman was made up of four things:

1. Total obedience to Christ
2. Prayer at all times
3. A desire and willingness to suffer with Christ (and love Christ as he did)
4. Love of nature/creation in all its forms.

Brother Ramon's book 'Franciscan Spirituality' will however be for some years an important foundational source for all of us in the Third Order. It is a splendid first resource for us as we map out our own Franciscan journey. Each chapter addresses the major Franciscan themes, the vision of God and gifts from the life and experience of Francis and his later followers, which must be always central to our own vision. We are given an outline of this rich Franciscan vision very accessibly and clearly. The continuing development of the Franciscan charism is also very helpfully explored in many chapters. There is implicit in Ramon's writing a challenge to us all to work out in prayer and study what are the main elements of the Franciscan vision which inspire each of us - and in response, to set ourselves to work at it with prayer and study.

To answer my own question and challenge – I set out five essential elements to what I understand to be my Franciscan journey and spirituality

1. **Penitence.** There is some sense that penitence and 'lament' for one's own sins and the worlds are at the heart of following Francis - after all the Third Order was originally an order of penitents. Repentance obviously has a focus on one's own individual shortcomings. Some members of the Order will use the sacrament of reconciliation and some will not. This is in the Anglican tradition. Individual penitence and its central turning to God must recognise that the place of contemplative prayer, and a growing vision and desire for justice and peace and with it the identification of institutional sin in our world, must be confronted and prayed about. Penitence is thus not a self-focused dimension of our spiritual life but an orientation which has social consequences as well as personal ones.
2. **Practising the presence of God** in prayer, contemplation, thought and action. This reflects Francis own movement between the desire to be contemplative and the need for action in mission. The twin poles of action and contemplation will be very important to us as Franciscans today.
3. **Celebrating the real presence of God** in the Eucharist and in God's Presence in the whole created world, celebrating a Gospel in which God's love is for all in His world. (Both the Testament of 1226 and the

Canticle of the Sun give Francis range of joy and faith in both redemption and creation). I believe that for us this means the imaginative extension of a eucharistic life in fellowship and fraternity, in which we see Christ in each other and all humanity and Creation as essential to our spiritual endeavour.

4. **A willingness to struggle for Justice and Peace** as necessary to the coming Kingdom of God, and also to suffer for it if necessary. The lessons Francis learnt, from the leper to the encounter with the Sultan, suggest that there is a struggle for insight and action for Justice and Peace which Francis only touches upon but which is central to his focus and our vocation. The issues raised by our vision of Justice and peace and simplicity should be central and mainstream in the Order

5. **An openness to development.** Just as Francis developed in the course of his experience so with our focus on Christ in penitence, in seeking Him in contemplation and action, in rejoicing in His presence in Eucharist and Creation and in His call for justice and peace with simplicity we have the essentials of a vision of His coming Kingdom. We, and the Order to which we belong, can develop and grow in Christ our Lord if we are open to this. We need to be a people of faith who can take risks, accept and be healing when mistakes are made in the realisation that our efforts to further our vision will never be perfect. We need to be loving, understanding and supportive of others who are making courageous and sacrificial efforts which may go beyond what we can attempt ourselves. Openness and prayer for the courageous and innovative people in our Order and the world should be part of our spirituality.

What would your five marks of Franciscan Spirituality for today be? How would each of us construct a Franciscan spirituality that helps us? It is by using the life and ministry of Francis and his developing experience as God's Servant that we can construct a faithful Franciscan Spirituality and adapt it to our times and personal circumstances.

Whatever way you choose, Francis's was a very creative and non-systematic spirituality. It has been developed by Bonaventure, interpreted more simply by Bishop Moorman and unsystematically by Brother Ramon and countless others. We have a rich gift in all that we have received from the life and witness of Brother Francis of Assisi.

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18 August 2009